Working with Anger

SOME POWERFUL PRACTICAL TIPS

By Dr. Russ Harris

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ANGER

Therapists often ask me: How do you work with 'anger' in the ACT model? And my answer is: "anger is a feeling… so we work with it much the same as with any other feeling."

COMMON INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- Values & goals, for motivation to do the hard work
- Clarifying 'how' anger is a problem
- Separate the emotion from the action
- Noticing & naming
- Normalising & validating
- Accepting
- Exploring
- Utilising
- Noticing how it changes
- Expansive awareness/ dropping anchor
- Acting flexibly with it
- Defusion
- Self-compassion

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VALUES & GOALS

Even a little bit of work up front on values & goals can be useful to provide motivation to do the hard work. Ideally you will start gathering this kind of information on your first session. Remember these vitally important questions from your case formulation worksheet? If you spend time answering them, the work will go much more smoothly.

IF ANGER WAS NO LONGER A PROBLEM ...

What would the client like to stop or start doing, do more of or less of?

How would he like to treat himself, others, life, the world, differently?

What goals would she like to pursue?

What activities would she like to start or resume?

What people, places, events, activities, challenges, would he like to start approaching rather than avoiding?

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DECONSTRUCTING A "PROBLEMATIC" EMOTION

From an ACT perspective, no emotion is problematic in and of itself. An emotion, only becomes "problematic" (i.e. interferes with a rich and meaningful life) in a specific context: of fusion, experiential avoidance, and unworkable action.

In ACT, we aim to change such a context to one of defusion, acceptance, and values-guided action (i.e. a context of psychological flexibility). In this new context, the emotion is no longer "problematic". To help us in this work, it's often useful to "deconstruct" the context into "three elements". We can then work with these "elements" one at a time.

In a context where an emotion has become "problematic", we can expect to find some or all of the following elements (always #1 and #3, & often but not always #2):

1. Fusion

2. Experiential Avoidance

3. Unworkable Action

NB: The same applies to thoughts, feelings, memories, urges, sensations, schemas, narratives, cravings, withdrawal symptoms etc.

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HOW IS IT A PROBLEM?

If we don't know 'how' an emotion – fear, anger, sadness, guilt, anxiety, etc - is problematic for a client, it's hard to know how to work with it. Often it's useful for the therapist to say something like: "I get this emotion is a problem for you. I just need to know a bit more about how this is a problem for you; in other words, what is it getting in the way of?"

How is it holding you back?

What is it getting in the way of?

What kind of things do you do when this feeling shows up, that make life worse?

If it were no longer a problem for you….

What would you stop doing or start doing, do more of or less of?

How would you treat yourself, others, life, the world, differently?

What goals would you pursue?

What activities would you start or resume?

What people, places, events, activities, challenges, would you approach, start, resume or contact - rather than avoid or withdraw?

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SEPARATE THE EMOTION FROM THE ACTION

One key aspect of our work in ACT is to separate the urge, impulse, thought, feeling, emotion that is present (antecedent) from the action that accompanies it.

With anger, we want to help the client bring mindfulness to her emotion; respond to it with defusion, acceptance, contacting the present moment, so that it no longer controls her actions. This then enables the client to choose alternative, more values-congruent actions.

A useful phrase (please modify as desired): “You can’t simply stop feelings of anger from arising. But you can learn new skills to handle them more effectively – so they don’t control you, don’t push you around. You can take the power out of them, so they come and go without pushing you around. This will give you a lot more self-control; you’ll have a lot more control over what you say and do when anger shows up.”

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NOTICING ANGER

Just as with any emotion, feeling, sensation, the aim is to notice 'anger' with curiosity and openness. We can ask clients:

Where is it located in the body? Where do you notice it most?

If a client says it's 'all over', we can ask her to explore her body, bit by bit:

Where is the anger greatest?

Where it least? Is it in your fingers? Is it in your thumb? Is it in your wrist/forearm/ elbow/ etc.

(Note: This is a simple way of introducing a step-by-step body scan.)

We can also ask:

What is the size, shape, outline, temperature?

Is it 'at the surface' or 'deeper inside'?

Is it moving or still?

Are there hot spots, cold spots, vibrations, pulsations etc?

NAMING ANGER

Just as with any other emotion, feeling, sensation, the aim is to non-judgmentally name it - e.g. "Here's anger" or "I'm noticing anger" or "I'm having a feeling of anger"

Of course, anger has many relatives: impatience, frustration, irritation, annoyance, rage etc. It's good to help clients increase their emotional literacy; name a range of different 'shades' or 'varieties' of anger, not just calling it all 'anger'.

At times, we may initially just use the client's language as a starting point, e.g. "A feeling of wanting to punch someone". The client isn't naming an emotion as such – rather he is naming an urge or a desire – but it's a good starting point for noticing and naming private experiences correlated with his anger.

At other times we may use client's own metaphors as a starting point e.g. a "hot fire" or a "red hot coal" in the chest. We can then segue into naming this as "anger".

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IF CLIENTS CAN'T NOTICE THEIR OWN ANGER?

Occasionally a client can't even notice their feelings of anger. This is common in dissociative states, for example. With such clients we'd initially need to work on general body awareness – ultra quick body scans, etc.

Over time, we'd build up the skills to be able to tune into the body more, and consciously access the many sensations and feelings in there.

NORMALISING & VALIDATING

We acknowledge that anger is a common and natural response for people. We talk about its evolutionary origins – the fight part of a fight-flight response.

We defuse from unhelpful stories about it.

We facilitate self-compassion: help clients to acknowledge that it's difficult to have this anger, and help them to treat themselves kindly.

Kind self-touch exercises are especially valuable for this – laying a hand gently on top of the anger, and 'sending kindness inwards', etc.

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ACCEPTING ANGER

We can …
- breathe into it,
- make room for it,
- hold it gently,
- allow it to be there,
- allow it to freely come, stay and go, as it chooses

We can use any acceptance technique, practice or method we like. I am a big fan of 'physicalizing', where we imagine the feeling as a physical object in the body:

What is the shape, size, colour, texture, temperature, surface, weight, texture? Is there any movement, vibration, pulsation?

EXPLORING ANGER

We rarely if ever just have one feeling. With any feeling that is present, it's useful to explore: Are there any other feelings in there? What else can you notice?

After the client has accepted the feeling of anger, it's often helpful to ask: Is there maybe another feeling underneath it? Can we explore? Can you see if you can 'peel back' the top layer, and see if there's maybe something beneath?

Of course, sometimes we won't discover anything 'underneath it' except more anger. But at other times, we 'find' painful emotions 'beneath the surface': anger, fear, sadness, guilt, shame etc.

We can then work with these emotions just as with any other ones: notice, name, validate, normalize, acceptance, self-compassion, etc.

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FEELINGS & EMOTIONS ARE USEFUL

In ACT, we want to explicitly convey to all clients that our feelings & emotions; that even the most painful and difficult ones give us important information, which we can make good use of. So it's often useful to share with clients the following information about feelings & emotions:

They often remind us of what is important to us, what matters to us.

They often alert us to issues we need to address: problems and challenges and 'reality gaps', changes we need to make in our life, changes we need to make in the way we treat ourselves and others.

They can inform our decision-making, enhance our intuition, enable us to make wiser choices.

They can alert us to threats or opportunities outside of conscious thought.

So once a client contacts anger – and/or other emotions/feelings "beneath" the anger - we can start looking at how to make good use of them, as follows…

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UTILISING OUR FEELINGS

Useful questions for just about any feeling or emotion include:

What does this feeling/emotion tell you really matters to you?

What does this feeling/emotion remind you that you need to address, face up to, take action on?

What does this feeling/emotion remind you about the way you want to treat yourself/ treat others?

What does this feeling/emotion tell you that: you've lost/ you need to be careful about/ you want to stand up for/ you deeply care about/ you need to deal with?

What does this feeling/emotion tell you about the way you'd like the world/ yourself/others/life to be?

Note how these questions can easily segue into values and committed action. For example, after exploring the previous question we could ask: What kind of things can you do to help the world/yourself/others/life to be more like the way you want it?

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NOTICING HOW IT CHANGES

With any feeling or sensation or emotion it can be useful to do self-as-context work. We can ask the client to use "that observing self part" or use "the part of you that notices", to step back and watch this feeling.

Then we can ask him to notice how the feeling changes over time. For example, we might ask him to check in every few minutes and notice the feeling's size, shape, location, temperature etc. We can also ask him to notice the effects on it of breathing, stretching, moving, grounding & centering, connecting with values, mindfully drinking a glass of water, etc.

We might add at times comments to enhance the self-as-context experience: "And notice, your feelings and sensations are changing all the time; but the part of you that notices is unchanging, always there, always available."

We can also ask clients to practice noticing these changes between sessions – and to be alert for other feelings, emotions that may show up – and to notice what those new feelings & emotions are, and when they occur, during what activities or situations etc.

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ACTING FLEXIBLY WITH ANGER

With any thought, feeling, sensation, emotion, urge, image, or memory, it's useful for the client to experience he can act flexibly with it; he doesn't have to wait until it's gone, and nor does he have to let it control his actions (i.e. he doesn't have to do what it 'tells him to do'.). He can act, guided by values, even with the feeling, sensation, emotion or urge present.

This is usually most powerful when done as experiential work, and least effective when discussed in an intellectual or didactic manner (where it often ends with the client insisting it's not possible).

One simple way to make this experiential for the client is to get her physically acting while the feeling is actually present in session; get her taking control of her arms and legs - stretching, shifting position, mindfully walking, mindfully eating or drinking, kind self-touching etc. The client then actually experiences that even with the feeling present, she can still exert control over her actions.

EXPANSIVE AWARENESS (DROPPING ANCHOR)

With any feeling or sensation or emotion it can be useful to expand awareness: As well as this feeling of XYZ, what else can you notice? Can you notice any other feelings, sensations, thoughts, memories, images, urges? Your body posture? The room around you? What you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch?

We can then work on expansive awareness: "So notice, there are more feelings present in your body than just anger. See if you can expand your awareness now – keep your anger in the spotlight, but also bring up the lights on these other feelings."

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DEFUSION

Often, emotional states – and the unworkable actions that accompany them - are fueled or amplified by fusion with rules, reasons, judgments, past, future or self. It's often useful then to work on defusing such cognitions.

When working with anger & aggression, we commonly find fusion with a lot of:

a) harsh judgments about myself, others, or the world

b) rigid rules/beliefs/ideas about how I, others, or the world SHOULD or SHOULDN'T be, and what's RIGHT or WRONG.

It's often useful to do defusion with these, using 'workability' as your starting point for leverage. If aggression is the main issue, then expect to explore this idea: Aggression often works in the short term to get your needs met, but does it work in the long term to give you the life you want, especially the kind of relationships you want? If you hold on tightly to these thoughts, let them guide you – what direction does that take your life in the long term – better or worse?

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SELF-COMPASSION

Whenever clients suffer from or struggle with any type of difficult thought, feeling, emotion, memory, urge, impulse, craving, sensation etc., self-compassion work is helpful.

We can help our clients to:
• Acknowledge their pain/suffering/difficulty/discomfort
• Validate their pain/suffering/difficulty/discomfort
• Make room for their pain/suffering/difficulty/discomfort
• Unhook from harsh self-criticism,
• Treat themselves kindly, and
• Experience connectedness with others.

We can, of course, do this just as readily with anger as with other emotions. (Indeed, at times when clients respond self-compassionately to anger, it 'lifts' – and the pain 'beneath' it 'rises to the surface'.)

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